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Easter 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Real Shepherd for Real Life”

Text: John 10:1-10 (Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

It is a very interesting combination of readings that we heard today. Readings that at first may seem, well, somewhat contradictory.

First we heard in the Introit Jesus' wonderful words: *I am the good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, and I lay down my life for the sheep.* And maybe when you heard those words you thought of the twenty-third Psalm, and the green pastures, and the silent waters. And we think: Yes, its good to be a lamb in the flock of the good Shepherd.

And then we heard the reading from Acts that seemed to confirm this. For what a great picture of the Church! *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* And there was unity and harmony and gladness and growth. That must have been the “golden age” of the Church. And we think: Yes, how good it must have been to have been in the Church then.

But then we heard from Peter, and we heard something completely different! Something not good, we would say. For Peter speaks not of the green pastures and silent waters that we like, and says nothing of unity and harmony and peace – he instead talks about *suffering unjustly . . . and doing good and suffering for it.* And then most scandalously of all, he says *this* is the way of Christ, the good Shepherd; *this* is [our] example, that [we] might follow in his steps.

So . . . which is it? What is the Christian life like? Peace or persecution? Serenity or suffering? Many want to know, and you can find any number of preachers that will tell you what you want to hear. There is no shortage of voices in our world today, all

ying and trying to shepherd you. But the question is not *which* shepherding voice will you listen to, but which is the voice of your Shepherd? The true Shepherd. The Good Shepherd.

Before we go on, however, we should address a couple of misperceptions, which will help us resolve these seeming contradictions. First, while we do not know exactly when David penned Psalm 23, we do know that his life and reign as king of Israel was not all green pastures and silent waters! There was plenty of sin, political intrigue, a mutiny by his own son, and suffering. And as far as the early church goes – well, it was really more bloody than golden. The apostles were arrested and flogged and martyred. Saul was rounding up all the Christians he could find. And there were internal disagreements and problems, from the church in Jerusalem to the church in Corinth, which was a real mess.

No, wherever there has been the Church, there satan has been attacking her. Whether it was in the Garden of Eden, first century Jerusalem, 21st century America, or any time in between. And one of satan's favorite tools is getting us to doubt either our own faith, or God's promise. And so know if you are suffering, or doubting, you are in good company.

And so the Christian life is not a life free from suffering and doubting, or a life with the absence of problems or pain – it is rather as Jesus described it in the Holy Gospel. For there He brings together problems and peace, suffering and serenity, altogether in one realistic picture. **And so here Jesus gives us true hope.** Not the false and unattainable hope of reproducing a never-existent golden age in the Church, or of having a life free from problems and struggles – but a life of hope and joy in the midst of these things, even while suffering for doing good. A life to live abundantly, with a peace that surpasses understanding.

And so Jesus doesn't flatter us with smooth words or lure us to join His club with false promises and grand ideas of transcending this life. No! He puts us right down in the midst of this life and says: *Yup. This is what it is.* The Church is like life in a sheepfold. Sometimes it's crowded and smelly. Sometimes we find sheep we don't like so much. Sometimes there are fights among the sheep. Sometimes we don't feel like being shepherded, and want to go off on our own. *But you know what, Jesus says?* You're all My sheep. Because I bore your sins in My body. I died that you might live. I created you, and I redeemed you. You are mine, and I love you. I love you when you're good, and I love you when you're not so good. I will discipline you

when you need it, I will bandage your wounds when you're hurt, and I will go after you when you wander off. I will protect you, and give you all that you need for your life. I do not promise you "sheep paradise" – your own pasture, your own stream of water without other sheep tramping in it, or your own private, luxurious sheepfold. **No, but I promise you myself.** That I will never leave you or forsake you. You are not only mine – I am yours.

I dare say that's a different picture than many have of being a Christian. But then Jesus adds to that also, by talking of thieves and robbers that climb into the sheep fold. *Yup – this too is the way it is.* These are the false prophets, false teachers, false churches, false promises, and false thinking of the world, all inspired by satan, that want to lead us away from our Good Shepherd. That want to take us away from Christ, by hook or by crook. To make us disappointed with Christ, or disillusioned with His Church, or to go after the mirage of something that looks better. And yup, they're not only outside the sheepfold, outside the Church – they climb inside also, and cause a ruckus. And it doesn't take very long to see these kinds of troublemakers in the Church today, with all kinds of agendas and all kinds of teachings.

Perhaps the first thing we think of when this happens is this: well why not just build bigger walls around the sheepfold! Higher and stronger! Better defenses is what we need. And why does Jesus let them in? Why doesn't our Good Shepherd keep them out?

Well, first of all, bigger, higher, stronger walls don't work. Jerusalem was a city built on a hill, with big, high, strong walls. But Jerusalem fell – but not because of the armies from without, but the sin from within. The armies from without simply fed the fear and doubt, the idolatry and spiritual adultery, that was causing decay from the inside out. And so something *more*, something greater, than walls is necessary to protect the sheep: and that is, namely, the voice of our Shepherd. For while walls may *seem* better and stronger, in reality they cannot give us what we need. Only the voice of our Shepherd can do that. The voice of our Saviour Jesus Christ. The voice of the Gospel.

For it is His voice that gives us forgiveness. And with the forgiveness of our sins, the healing of our hearts from the inside out. It is His voice that leads us in the midst of the troubles of this life, so that we do not follow the strange voices of the thieves and robbers, but flee from them. It is His voice that comforts and calms us in the midst of trials and confusion, cutting through the darkness with His light and His truth. It

is His voice that comes to us and calls to us when we have wandered and are lost. It is His voice that strengthens us in weakness, when the darkness is the deepest, that we know that He is there. For He who created us, and came to us in our sin, even to death on the cross, will not now leave us on our own. We have His Word on it!

And through that Word, His voice is still calling out today, calling sinners to repentance, to receive His life-giving forgiveness. His Word that came to little Eli today and made him a child of God through Holy Baptism, giving him faith, and forgiveness, and all that he needs. And His Word that feeds us again today, with His own body and blood. His Word that says *This is My body* and it most surely is; and that says *This is My blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins*, and it most surely does. And through these means, these words, this voice, Jesus is serving as the Door – bringing sheep into His fold, His Church, and providing for us all that we need. Whatever He does not give we do not need, and whatever He *does* give it exactly what we need. What we need to have *life*, and to have it *abundantly*.

But what does that mean? To have life *abundantly*? Having life abundantly is different, I think, than having an abundant life – although that’s a common confusion today. For we think that life consists in the abundance of what I have, what I do, what I can accomplish and accumulate. But that’s not what Jesus is saying here! *He does not promise an abundant life, but that we will have life abundantly*. And that is more than simply filling up our puny little lives – it is the exact opposite! It is to make our life more than we ever thought or imagined it could be. The life that God designed especially for you.

And if it takes trials and troubles and struggles and crosses to give you that life, then that is what your Shepherd will do. And as Peter said, this is *a gracious thing* – a working of God’s grace for us. For truth be told, we like our puny little lives and our puny little pleasures and our little pet sins. But that is not good enough for your Saviour, your Shepherd. He has come to give you more. And maybe He has to take away the less to give you the greater. Maybe He has to pry your cold, dead hands off your old life and sins to give you His life. If so, thanks be to God! He is not punishing you, but saving you. Calling you. Teaching you. For that is the kind of Shepherd you have.

So do not fear, little flock. You have a Good Shepherd. You are Jesus’ little lamb. (LSB #740) For the sheep the Lamb has bled, and died, and lives again. (LSB #463) And in Him, so will you. The *thief may come to you to steal and kill and destroy*, and if

he does he still has lost! For Jesus gives life from the dead. And the life that He has given to me and you and today little Eli, will never be taken away. For it is life that is not only abundant, but also eternal.

For Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

And He is the great Shepherd of His sheep.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.